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Breath, Motion and Time: Narrative Techniques in Representational Chinese Handscroll Painting

Nefes, Hareket ve Zaman: Rulo Formatlı Temsîlî Çin Resimlerinde Kullanılan Anlatı Teknikleri Üzerine Bir İnceleme

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Abstract

This article examines the problems of temporality in narrative theory within the specific frame of Chinese pictorial narratives in handscroll format. This particular focus on handscrolls and on the Chinese tradition of representational painting—as opposed to other media of production and other traditions of representational art—is motivated by the privileged status of Chinese painting in art history, and the invaluable insights offered by the handscroll format to the field of narrative theory. Chinese painting constitutes one of the two oldest traditions of representational painting in the world, along with the amply studied European tradition, and it significantly differs from the European tradition due to the value it places on deixis; while one of the goals of the European representational tradition has been to perfect techniques that would erase all signs of the artist's brushwork, so that a full illusion of three-dimensional reality could be created on a two-dimensional surface, Chinese representational painting has placed great import on the preservation of the traces of the artist's brushwork; so much so that an educated contemplation of a representational Chinese painting invariably involves two subjects: the visible

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subject, such as a landscape or a scene from daily life, and the subject of the artist's hand moving over the painting's surface at the time of its creation. In paintings rendered in the handscroll format, where viewers are allowed to experience movement both in space and in time, parallel to their own movements of rolling and unrolling the scroll, an array of problems concerning narrative time, memory, and learning through story-building could be addressed effectively. Thus, through an overview of the six principles of Chinese painting, followed by an analysis of the variations in compositional method and the prevailing genres of handscroll paintings, this article explores the intricacies of storytelling—through verbal or pictorial means alike—not as a one-way communication, but rather as a neural network where the meaning, that is, the experience of the story is continuously re-built through multi-directional interactions with the artists and their work.

Keywords: *Chinese painting, handscroll, deixis, narrative theory, time*

Öz

Bu makale, el rulosu formatlı Çin resimlerinin oluşturduğu belirli değerlendirme çerçevesi içinde, anlatı kuramının temel sorunlarından olan zaman sorununu çeşitli boyutlariyle ele almaktadır. Böylesi bir çalışmada diğer sanatsal üretim formlarının ve diğer temsîlî resim geleneklerinin değil de özellikle Çin geleneğinin ve Çin el rulolarının dikkate alınmış olmasının nedenleri, Çin resminin dünya sanat tarihindeki ayrıcalıklı konumu ve el rulosu formatındaki resimsel anlatıların, anlatı kuramını zenginleştiren değerli katkılarıdır. Çin resmi, üzerinde sayısız araştırmalar yapılmış olan Avrupa resim sanatı ile birlikte, dünyanın en eski iki temsîlî resim geleneğinden birisini teşkil etse de, "deixis," yani "gösterim" kavramına verdiği değer açısından Avrupa geleneğine göre önemli farklılıklar içerir. Avrupa temsîlî resim geleneğinde güdülen temel amaçlardan birisi, sanatçının fırça darbelerinin izlerini tamamen yok edecek ve böylelikle iki boyutlu bir yüzeyde kusursuz bir üç boyutlu gerçeklik yanılsaması yaratacak resim tekniklerinin geliştirilip mükemmelleştirilmesi iken, Çin temsîlî resim sanatında, sanatçının fırça darbelerinden yansıyan bedensel eforunun izlerinin muhafaza edilmesi büyük bir önem arz eder. Öyleki, temsîlî Çin resimlerinin bilinçli ve eğitimli taraflarca yapılan değerlendirmelerinde, her resmin daima iki ayrı konusu bulunmaktadır: Bunlardan birisi resmin gözle görünen konusu—mesela bir peyzaj calışmasındaki dağ, göl, orman ve bunun gibi doğa sahneleri—diğeri ise, eserin hayata getirildiği anlarda sanatçının elinin resmin yüzeyinde gidip gelmelerinden hasıl olan fiziksel üretim konusudur. El rulosu formatındaki resimlerde izleyiciler, resmin konusundan doğan zamanda ve mekânda yolculuk duygusuna, ellerindeki ruloyu bir ucundan açıp diğer ucundan sararak, kendi beden hareketleriyle eşlik etme imkânı bulur; dolayısiyle bu tip rulo formatlı resimler, anlatı zamanı, bellek ve öykü paylaşımı aracılığiyle öğrenim kavramları ile ilgili bir dizi sorunun verimli bir biçimde ele alınmasını sağlar. İşte bu amaçla yola çıkılan bu çalışmada, öncelikle Çin resminin altı temel prensibi sunulmakta, daha sonra çeşitli kompozisyon tipleri ve özellikle el rulosu formatında

öne çıkan konu türleri incelenmektedir. En son değerlendirme noktasında, ister görsel, ister dilsel yollarla anlatılmış olan bütün öykülerin, tek yönlü bir iletişim değil de, sanatçılar ve eserleriyle çok yönlü etkileşimlerde bulunulmasını sağlayan, anlamın, yani öykü deneyiminin tekrar tekrar ve her an değişen biçimlerde yaratıldığı tükenmez enerjili bir tür sinir ağı teşkil ettikleri saptaması yapılmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Çin resmi, rulo formatlı resimler, gösterim, anlatı kuramı, zaman*

Introduction: Living breath and resonance in Chinese painting

"Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé" ("How Wang-Fô Was Saved"), an ancient Chinese tale retold by Marguerite Yourcenar in *Nouvelles Orientales* (*Oriental Tales*), presents the reader with the life and adventures of a fictional Chinese painter—Wang-Fô—who seems an elegant amalgamation of several historical Chinese painters of old times acclaimed for their mastery of the brush and ink, for their particular aesthetic, intellectual and moral pose, and above all, for their alleged power to breathe life into their creation.[1] In the case of Wang-Fô, this power has no metaphorical value: he is said to truly possess the gift of bestowing life upon his paintings, by adding one final touch of colour into the eyes[2] (Yourcenar, 1975: 17), and the source of his creative power lies in his own vision.

Indeed, in representational Chinese painting, vision is understood to be a gate through which the artist is absorbed into the subject s/he paints, watering it with the essence of her/his own soul. The very being of the artist thus turns slowly into the being of the subject, shedding away all the rest like an old skin; and they—the artist and the subject—start to move together, to breathe together as if they were dancing.

The resulting landscape, no matter how realistic it may seem, goes always beyond palpable reality, beyond representation, as emphasized by the critic Wen C. Fong: "When the 'breath' of a painter, and thus of his work, stimulates a viewer's response, his painting projects a life and energy beyond physical representation" (1992: 5). It is not the mountains in nature that such a landscape depicts. No matter how close to nature they may be, Chinese paintings are first and foremost paintings of the mind; nothing, therefore, not even the surface of a piece of paper or silk can keep them from moving. On the contrary, they entice even the scroll they are painted upon, and even the eye and the hand that touch that scroll, to move, to move all together.

This liveliness relates, in fact, to the first and the most important one among the six principles of Chinese painting which were originally defined by Hsieh Ho, a fifth-century portrait painter from Nanking, in his treatise *Ku hua p'in lu* or *Classified Record of Ancient Painters* (Sullivan, 1979: 31). While the other principles are related to technical aspects of painting such as inner structure and brushwork, outward likeness, natural coloring, composition design and transmission of traditions by copying older works (Weng, 1978: xvii), the first principle is of a spiritual nature, one that brings together the vitality of the painter, the painting, and the viewer. This is the principle of *c'hi-yün-sheng-tung*, which can be literally translated as "breath-resonance-life-motion" (Fong, 1992: 4), and which can be

understood as the resonance of the mind, or vitality, or "the vital movement of the mind by the rhythm of things" (Sirén, 1970: 104), among other things.[3] Mastery in Chinese painting depends above all on this innate ability to capture the resonant spirit of things, whether they are animate or not. "This indefinable quality", Wan-Go Weng says, "is in the twinkle of the eye, the gesture of the hands or the grace of the posture" (1978: xvii). And as Chang Yen-yüan, a critic from the T'ang period states, the brush of some rare masters like Wu Tao-tzu, who displays this gift at its best, is so powerful that "it can hardly be contained on the silken canvas"(Sirén, 1970: 105).

In contemplating a handscroll, which may be several yards long, the left hand opens the unseen parts while the right hand winds up the parts already seen to create a sense of traveling (Weng, 1978: xiv; Fong, 1992: 13-4); the eye, following the hands, moves on the painting not only in space, but also in time when there is a narrative, or a depiction of, say, the four seasons in a mountain landscape, which are separated from each other by a span of water, a mountain after a cloudy valley, or the mist (Weng, 1978: xxi). Allowing the viewer to thus move forward and backward both in time and in space, freely, the handscroll naturally comes to the foreground as a favourite format for narrative representations in the Chinese pictorial tradition (Fong 1992: 13), as well as for the particular purposes of the present article, which will focus on Chinese narrative paintings in an attempt to explore what might be gained by studying narratives in those instances where they, so to speak, show their stitches; when, in other words, the medium itself proves crucial for an understanding of the narrative.

The choice of the Chinese tradition of pictorial narratives, within the general framework of narrative theory and the "narrativist turn" in human sciences (Kreiswirth, 2000), is not a random one. As Norman Bryson, in his *Vision and Painting*, remarks: "[I]f China and Europe possess the two most ancient traditions of representational painting, the traditions nevertheless bifurcate, from the beginning, at the point of *deixis*" (1983: 89; emphasis added). In other words, while the European tradition has for the longest time aspired for, and concentrated on, the concealment or the erasure of the medium and thus of the presence of the painter behind the work (Fong, 1992: 4), the Chinese tradition has held in the highest esteem, and in fact, demanded, the possibility of perceiving or *reading* the traces left by the painter's arm, brush in hand, as s/he moved, once upon a time, over the surface of the painting. "Because of the importance of the artist's personal 'trace', or imprint, in his work," says Wen C. Fong, "achieving illusion by concealing or erasing the medium would have been counterproductive" (1992: 5). Thus, in looking at a Chinese landscape painting, for example, the viewer is actually contemplating two subjects instead of one: "landscape is certainly the subject, but equally the subject is the work of the brush in 'real time' [in the sense it is used in cybernetics] and as extension of the painter's own body" (Bryson, 1983: 89).

Now, when we consider the particular case of narrative paintings, the value invested in deictic reference in the Chinese tradition, as opposed to the European, opens up a vast field for consideration as much inspiring as informative, as it brings together, in a visual medium, all the various aspects of the problem of temporality in narratives; those problems which, to state it more precisely, involve "the time of the told as played out against the time of its telling (or the shown against the showing)" (Kreiswirth, 2000: 308); it is not only

possible, for a competent reader of these visual narratives, to actually see the traces of the performance, or the *showing* of the painter, as displayed by his/her brushwork, but also to perceive more clearly the constructedness of the *shown* and the complications inherent to its temporality, since it has been presented in or transposed into a different medium, one that imposes a different set of rules and conventions on the act of narrating with respect to the verbal medium; a truly competent viewer of a narrative handscroll would be aware not only of the inherent time of the sequence of events that makes up the narrative and the time taken by the painter to bring the images of those events together, but also of the time s/he, as a viewer, takes to follow the narrative, or to move backward in it, in order perhaps to make up a different narrative, or even to freeze it, in order to find leisure in reverie.

After these introductory remarks, the following pages will proceed from a brief overview of the main methods of composition employed in the execution of pictorial narratives in China, to a more lengthy discussion of the narrative handscrolls, focusing on some individual works and their historical, (auto)biographical, and temporal, as well as aesthetic, implications.

Methods of composition

The emergence of pictorial narratives in China dates back to the Warring States period between 475 – 221 B.C.E., at the end of the Bronze Age (Fong, 1992: 13). Having started off as the duty of craftsmen and artisans to fulfill the ritual, didactic and administrative needs of the state—to ornate tombs, for instance, with pictorial biographies of the deceased (Lengyel, 2000, p. 263), as well as to provide rulers with some "instruments of legitimation" (Fong, 1992: 13)—the art of pictorial narration soon enough attracted the attention of the aristocracy and of the scholar-official class, to attain a respectable status as of the times of the Han dynasty (207 B.C.E. –220 C.E.) onward.

Critic Pao-chen Chen defines the pictorial narratives of the Han period to be "naive in narrative technique, ambiguous in temporal progression, and simple in spatial representation" (1995: 240), while those of the Six Dynasties period offer, in his view, much clearer definitions of space and time, and much more articulated representations of plots, characters and settings (239). Like most other scholars, he classifies these narratives, as much as those of the subsequent periods, under three main types of composition, which follow the text illustration categories proposed by Kurt Weitzmann in his *Illustration in Roll and Codex*: simultaneous, monoscenic and continuous or cyclic compositions (Chen, 1995, p. 240; Weitzmann, 1970: 13-17). While Weitzmann points out that in the development of the Ancient Greek art there was a gradual shift from the simultaneous to the monoscenic and then to the cyclic composition methods (14), Chen notes that in China these three types of composition flourished independently, without following any evolutionary pattern (240).

In the *simultaneous* composition, temporally different incidents or events of a narrative are conflated into a single scene, without repeating any of the figures, and thus "transgressing the limitations of the unity of time" (Weitzmann, 1970: 13). To illustrate such compositions, Chen chooses *Ching K'o Assassinating the King of Ch'in*[4], a stone engraving from the Wu Liang Shrine. He remarks quite rightfully that, if the story is not already known, the narrative is rather hard to construct; for the engraving provides no clues for the viewer to decipher the

temporal progression of the events, which are to be followed first from bottom to top, then from left to right, and then from right to the middle of the engraving.

Unfortunately, even when the path is thusly shown, any viewer who is not acquainted with the story of a certain Ching K'o who one day assassinated a certain King of Ch'in is very likely to prove unable to construct by himself the same story as that re-told by the critic Chen, or even anything approximately like it. This inability indicates that the function of such a work might have been more than just instructing some illiterate crowd, and that its very transgression of "the unity of time" might have been the result of a different approach to time. To make the point, however, one needs to tell the story, once more:

Chin K'o, our historical hero, is the guest of Prince Tan of Yen, which is a territory threatened by Cheng, the tyrannical ruler of Ch'in. When one of Cheng's generals escapes from his native Ch'in and seeks refuge in Yen, the tyrant Cheng demands from Prince Tan not only the respective general's head, but also the map of two areas in the Yen territory. The general nobly offers his head to the Prince in order to prevent the upcoming invasion, and Chin K'o assumes the task of delivering the head of the general and the map to the tyrant, planning to assassinate him with a dagger, which he hides inside the rolled map. When he appears before Cheng, however, the tyrant's survival instincts overthrow Chin K'o's plans; as the ruler flees in panic and manages, after a while, to draw his sword for self-protection, a guard pulls Chin K'o away. In a climax of fury and despair, Chin K'o hurls his dagger toward the tyrant ... and the dagger penetrates a column instead of Cheng's body. In the end, it is Chin K'o himself who is killed and the assassination never takes place (Chen, 1995: 240-1).

For those hearing the story for the first time, it should come as a great surprise that the assassination announced in the story's title *never* takes place. What, then, could be the underpinnings of the chaotic, irrational and transgressive temporality of this narrative engraving? Why could it be that the anonymous artist of this work chose particularly the simultaneous composition method in order to render this story, rather than either of the two other methods? It is perhaps by no accident that the engraving is entitled *Ching K'o Assassinating the King of Ch'in*: a title that fools the reader into believing that Ching K'o does really assassinate the tyrant, instead of one that would imply Ching K'o's attempt and failure to do so. If a didactic purpose was indeed sought in the production of this work, and if it was indeed destined for a viewer who would already know the story, including its disappointing end, then perhaps the artist wished to immortalize on the stone slab not the story itself, but rather that rightful and unfortunate *attempt*. By tearing the climactic events of the story out of their chronological order and scattering them over the stone surface, the artist was perhaps offering the viewer a *refutation* of chronological time, a gate into chaos where things that happen before occur at the same time as those that happen after, and things that do not happen do at the same time happen; the *possibility*, in brief, that the assassination attempt succeeds.

If the mark of the simultaneous composition is anachrony, that of the *monoscenic* composition would be frozen time: "A monoscenic composition shows certain characters' actions in a frozen moment" (Chen, 1995: 243). It is based, as Weitzmann remarks, "on the principle of the unity of time and place" (1970: 14), and since the problems of depicting

flowing time are irrelevant in this case, the gestures and attitudes of the figures become "increasingly expressive and individualized," in order to preserve the principle of breath and resonance, *ch'i-yün*, mentioned earlier.

In the *continuous* or *cyclic* composition, on the other hand, the artist has to tackle with, and offers one possible solution to, both the problems of depicting time and depicting three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane: "A continuous composition depicts a narrative cycle in consecutive scenes, which are woven into one organic entity with a clear sense of continuity in time and space" (Chen, 1995: 244). The flow of time is suggested by the recurrence of certain figures engaged in a chronological series of events, which may take place in one or many settings; the settings, and hence the events themselves, are usually separated from each other with the use of architectural or landscape-related details, which form the device of *space cells*.

When, as of the Six Dynasties period (3rd-5th century) on, Buddhist narrative paintings started to circulate in China and to influence the local traditions, the continuous composition method prevailed as a favourite among artists, for it contributed significantly to the attainment of these paintings' didactic purpose:

> Buddhist narrative paintings, like scriptures, are didactic religious vehicles that convey Buddhist values; they teach moral behaviour through the pictorial description of virtuous deeds. Therefore, whatever contributes a compelling narrative, with an articulate representation of spatial continuity and temporal progression, will be selected and developed. Such a painting was apparently more easily read by common pilgrims, most of them illiterate, than was a simultaneous composition which lacks a traceable plot, or a monoscenic composition in which the narrative was cut up in pieces (Chen, 1995: 265).

It is interesting that, although destined for mostly illiterate viewers, pictorial narratives rendered in a continuous composition are the ones closest to the structure of the verbal, in fact, the *written* tradition of narratives. Weitzmann remarks, "As the eye in reading a text moves from one writing column to another, so it moves now [in a continuous composition] from one picture to the next, *reading* them, so to speak" (1970: 17-8). The fulfillment of the didactic purpose of these pictorial narratives, then, depends heavily on the viewers' *visual* literacy; in other words, a considerable co-operation and competence are expected from the viewer, who should be able to recognize and follow their *serpentine* or *chronological lateral* or *achronological lateral*[5] layouts, and who, in order to succeed in doing all this, should already know the story behind the narrative; for these pictorial narratives, like their verbal counterparts, are free to offer a scrambled sequence of events at the level of their *discourse*, and expect the reader to perceive the implied chronological order at the level of the *story.*[6] *The Jātaka of the Deer King Ruru* (Northern Wei period, 386-534; mentioned by Chen, 1995: 251), for instance, would be one example of such a scrambled sequence offered in a continuous composition.[7]

Here is the crucial question: why does an artist, in creating a narrative painting with a didactic purpose, bother to scramble the sequence, thus risking to cause confusion and betray the purpose? Certainly, in times and cultures where the oral tradition of storytelling is strong

and alive, where stories are used as instruments of forming, maintaining and transmitting a certain kind of knowledge, and where, therefore, a number of stories are known by virtually everybody, an artist may be justified in expecting this minimum competence from a viewer; this, however, does not explain the extra effort of scrambling. In Chen's view (1995: 252), the artist does so simply because s/he is more interested in the pictorial arrangement of the events than in their chronological sequencing. Another hypothesis could be that there is no extra effort, since the artist her/himself has retained the story in this scrambled configuration. Before focusing on the particularities of narrative handscrolls, let us reflect upon a third hypothesis that dwells upon the notion of didacticity, which is as much vexed as, at least usually, taken for granted.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term *didactic*, coming from the Greek διδακτικ_ός, which means "apt at teaching," as "having the character or manner of a teacher or instructor," or as "characterized by giving instruction," or as "having the giving of instruction as its aim or object." Following these definitions, what is it exactly that a didactic pictorial narrative is capable of teaching? And how is it that it teaches it? The religious story itself, despite appearances, is not what is taught; the story is already well-known, so much so that, as Bryson (1983: 96) remarks, the narrative painting is expected to provide the minimum necessary for the viewer to *recognize* in the discourse of the particular painting the story that s/he already knows. If the didacticity of the pictorial narrative does not result from its narrating the story itself, then perhaps it is related to the way in which it opens up a space to help the viewer internalize or embody the story s/he knows. Such a reasoning is closely following in the wake of Walter Benjamin, when he asserts that storytelling allows people to exchange experience, rather than information, and that the best of such exchanges occur when the storyteller avoids explicating the psychological makeup and motivations of the characters:

> There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later (1968: 91).

The pictorial narrative, then, can be seen as an instrument that re-affirms and enhances the place of the story in the viewer's memory; and it does so not by way of illustrating or explaining the story, but on the contrary, by way of making the viewer internalize the story's resistance to explanation—"it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it" says Benjamin (89). To return to my initial question, the presence of a scrambled sequence or an achronological layout in the jātaka of the Deer King can be perhaps understood as an invitation to the viewer to be indeed confused at first, to have a moment of difficulty in recognizing the story represented by those images; but then s/he will recall, s/he will walk the path of the Deer King and the traitor once more, and put the events mentally, almost automatically, into the right order—the only order in which that story known by the viewer exists. In other words, "the story is what it is because..." is what is rejected; what is reaffirmed, through the pictorial narrative, is that "the story is what it is, just because."

Three categories of narrative

Apart from technical distinctions that can be made depending on the methods of composition discussed above, pictorial narratives in the Chinese tradition are generally studied under three categories defined by subject-matter: *moral-symbolic* narratives, *literary* narratives and *genre-descriptive* narratives (Hay, 1972: 298; Fong, 1992):[8] "In genre narrative, details from everyday life are observed and described. A literary narrative is a pictorial illustration of a verbal or poetic rendition of an event. A symbolic narrative communicates moral and didactic meanings through the visual image" (Fong, 1992: 21).

Even though narration itself was considered, as Hay remarks, the *raison d'être* of all pictorial art in China, moral-symbolic narratives appear to be the most deeply rooted in the tradition, since they fulfilled the ethical and didactic requirements, of whether Confucian or Buddhist paradigms, the most explicitly; to such an extent that "the bulk of painting was moral-narrative down to the seventh century" (1972: 298). Roughly a century later, it was time for the genre-descriptive narratives to flourish in their turn. The eight century, marked by the rule of the T'ang dynasty, witnessed a considerable increase in social awareness in literature; this found its echo in the fields of painting and calligraphy, where radical changes and revisions took place: "Genre-narrative painting used the well-developed techniques of figure painting, de-ethicized the tradition of moral-narrative and combined these with a tremendous interest in everyday observation" (Hay, 1972: 301). However, even though it is possible to track a concentration on genre-descriptive narratives from the eight to the eleventh centuries, the category was disregarded by most of the contemporary Chinese critics due to either moralistic, or high-literary concerns that these paintings failed to display. Hence, it did not take too long until the genre-descriptive category was, as Hay points out, overshadowed by "the personalization of symbolic content and the crystallization of a literary aesthetic" (1972: 301). And production in the moral-symbolic category too, following a brief revival during the rule of the Southern Sung emperor Kao-tsung (1127-62), came decisively to its end (Fong, 1992: 195). It should not, therefore, be incorrect to assume that the literary-narrative category proved to be the longest lasting tradition, gradually assimilating the essential qualities of the other two into its own structure.

It goes without saying that these categorical divisions are best approached as guidelines and tools, rather than as any important or revealing statements by themselves; that fusions along the dividing boundaries occur frequently, as is observed in most other systems of categorization; and that, finally, all three categories offer their own particularities as to what a pictorial narrative is or could be. With these considerations in mind, what follows is a more detailed discussion of the literary-narrative category, through the analysis of a specific painting in handscroll format.

Literary narrative paintings

Literary narrative paintings are almost always accompanied by the corresponding literary text in prose or poetry; they offer a great amount of details in human figures, architectural and landscape-related elements, like genre-descriptive narratives do, and they present a

sequence of interrelated events forming a coherent narrative, like moral-symbolic narratives do. The result of these features is that the open-endedness and the suggestiveness of the work are significantly reduced, to such an extent that they rather function as illustrations to written narrative texts, rather than as narratives by themselves. In any case, they seem to fulfill political, rather than aesthetic or intellectual purposes. It is probably no coincidence that the so-called revival of this category of narrative paintings occurred during the Southern Sung period, under the rule of the emperor Kao-tsung (1107-1187); Kao-tsung spent almost his entire lifetime striving to affirm and legitimize his authority as emperor, through rather surprisingly indirect means, which included his calligraphic production, as well as, in fact, narrative paintings (Murray, 1989: 28-30).

When the capital of the Northern Sung dynasty, Pien-Ching, was invaded by the Chin, the emperor Hui-tsung left his throne to his son Ch'in-tsung; however, before long they were both captured by the Chin, together with almost their entire court, except for one prince, K'ang—the ninth son of Hui-tsung—who managed to flee. Prince K'ang was declared Emperor Kao-tsung in 1127, although the legitimate emperor Ch'in-tsung, his brother, was still alive under captivity (Fong, 1992: 194-5). After some years of flight from his Chin persecutors, Kao-tsung finally established his court in the city of Lin-an in 1132, and signed a peace treaty with the Chin, accepting to pay them an annual tribute. In return, he negotiated to recover from the enemy the body of his now deceased father, the former emperor Hui-tsung, and his mother, who was still alive; not too surprisingly, he made no attempts to rescue his brother, Ch'in-tsung, and he exploited the much-revered Confucian virtue of filial piety to explain the recovery of his mother, which was in truth related to nothing other than his purposes of self-legitimation (Murray, 1989: 27-8).

One of the many ways in which he sought to attain these purposes was to rebuild the imperial collection of literature, calligraphy and painting, given the fact that it was essential for "each ruling house to establish its control over traditional culture and to possess the tangible artifacts of that culture as a manifestation of its authority" (1989: 28). The lack of any tangible artifacts to lay claim upon in a recently established capital led Kao-tsung to invite to his court as many painters as possible, but particularly those who had previously served under the rule of his father, emperor Hui-tsung (1989: 29). Among these was the venerable landscapist Li T'ang, who became Kao-tsung's favourite painter, and whom he very probably commissioned to produce a handscroll illustrating the ancient story of Duke Wen of Chin from the Eastern Chou period—771 - 256 B.C.E.

Attributed to Li T'ang, *Duke Wen of Chin Recovering His State* is a handscroll painting executed in ink and color on silk. As Murray (1989: 30) points out, even the technique of the painting is to be understood as an imperial statement, for, in encouraging the use of opaque mineral pigments on silk, instead of monochrome ink on paper, Kao-tsung was explicitly imposing upon his painters the traditions of the T'ang court, and was thus implicitly claiming to descend from it. In any case, what renders this handscroll special goes beyond the execution technique and material: it has mainly to do with the obvious biographical parallels found between the Duke Wen of old times and the emperor himself: "A ninth son, like Kao-tsung, Duke Wen spent many years trying to regain possession of his state, Chin, after being driven

into exile, and finally succeeded after a long period" (1989: 30). The handscroll consists of six monoscenic compositions illustrating the Duke's encounter with several personages during this extended return journey; and the accompanying text is the emperor Kao-tsung's own calligraphic work.

Fong remarks that the story had a particular appeal to the emperor, that he had read it over and over again as he was trying to secure stability in his reign, and that the painting very articulately depicted what the emperor considered to be "the principal attributes of rulership: leadership among allies, forbearance in humiliation, defiance in defeat, vigilance in security, loyalty in friendship, and magnanimity in victory" (1992: 196).

Loyalty in friendship, to give a detailed example, is depicted in a scene that takes place just before the Duke's triumphant entry into his capital city, at the banks of the Yellow River; while servants are occupied with horses and the ferry to be used to cross the river, a faithful follower of Duke Wen approaches him to request his dismissal, stating that he had not served his master well enough, and offers him a jade disk as a token of his loyalty. Duke Wen takes the disk in his hands and flings it deep down into the river, saying: "If ever my heart harbors suspicion, may I course down the river with these waters!" (Fong, 1992: 202).

This reanimation of trust and loyalty between a master and his subject takes place under the shadow of a leaning pine tree. As much as it may be true that Li T'ang makes use of the conventional tree-device, as a space-cell, to separate or elaborate his scenes, the fact that this intense moment of the narrative is depicted with the presence of an exquisite pine tree brings an additional idea into mind: that here the painter is addressing the Chinese viewer's knowledge of the age-old symbolism associated with pine trees, of which the twelfth-century scholar-painter Han Cho's words would be a good summary:

> Pine trees are like noblemen; they are the elders among trees. Erect in bearing, tall and superior, aloft they coil upward into the sky and their force extends to the Milky Way. Their branches spread out and hang downward, and below they welcome the common trees. Their reception of inferiors with reverence is like the virtue of the gentleman... (qtd. in Bush & Shih, 1985: 149).

In the image offered by Li T'ang, beside the bent but still majestic body of a pine tree, there stands the bent but still noble spirit of Duke Wen who, after all his misfortunes, is still capable of receiving his subject with respect and affection. What this observation suggests is that literary narrative paintings have a strong potential to incorporate the qualities of the moral-symbolic category in their composition. Actually, considering the amount and variety of keenly noted daily-life details present in this handscroll—such as the ferryman waiting with his pole, the exact type of carriages used, or the different reactions of two horses to the attention of a servant, etc.—the same hypothesis can be proposed for the assimilation of the genre-descriptive category as well.

One final issue to be discussed is related to the communication established in this handscroll in-between the viewer, the painter, and the painting itself. Fong observes that many of the pictorial elements, such as the above-mentioned horses and carriages, are depicted "at a sharply foreshortened angle, breaking out of the picture plane and coming

directly toward the viewer," and that in this manner the viewer is strongly invited to "become a participant in the unfolding drama" (1992: 209). And while the viewer is thus emphatically pulled into the painting, s/he is also allowed to be aware of the painter's bodily presence in it, thanks to the *plain drawing* technique that Li T'ang borrows from Li Kung-lin: rendered with a calligraphic, rather than pictorial, brushwork, Li T'ang's figures appear "both casually 'written' and kinesthetically charged" (1992: 207). In other words, the problem of deixis reappears.

Indeed, deixis appears to be the inconspicuous leitmotif of these remarks on Chinese narrative paintings, for which the following lines are intended to serve as speculative, rather than conclusive, reflections. It seems very difficult, almost daring, to tackle the issue of the traces left by the Chinese painter's arm, wrist, and brush in hand, without scrupulously distinguishing between the eighteen different styles of drapery lines used to represent different human figures, or the sixteen specific kinds of *wrinkle* used to produce a mountain-water surface; without recognizing the *axe-cut* stroke of the artist as opposed to his/her *rain-drop*, or *broken-reed* or *scudding-cloud* strokes and without knowing about the *mood*, the joy or the anguish, conveyed by each such stroke or line (Rowley, 1959: 19); nonetheless, the topic is fascinating enough to be considered at least a prompt for future studies. One only needs to read the technical remarks of yet another Chinese painter, Ch'eng Yao-t'ien, in order to understand what might be gained by focusing on the deictic qualities of a narrative painting:

> Emptiness acts at all levels of the body when one does calligraphy [or paints]. At each level, fullness, once it is ripe, yields to emptiness, and that takes place in the following order: the lower limbs → the upper limbs → the left side of the body → the right side of the body → the right shoulder → the right arm → the wrist → the fingers → the brush . . . . Emptiness has a double effect. Owing to it, the force of the stroke penetrates the paper to the point of going right through it, and also everything on the surface of the paper comes alive, moved by the breath. (qtd. in Cheng, 1994: 70-1)

From a technical point of view everything is clear; there is a traceable anatomical trajectory to *emptiness*, another complicated term in Chinese painting, which, in this case, implies the maximum concentrated energy of the painter as s/he starts painting. However, what lies at the end of that rationalized path is nothing but a miracle: the brush stroke pierces the paper/silk surface, the surface becomes alive with the brush's injection of that vital and resonant energy.

If storytelling is, more than anything else, an act of exchanging experiences as Benjamin understands it, then the narrative offered on the surface of a narrative handscroll is indeed only at the surface; beneath that visible, and living, crust lie the other narratives, those of the painter and of the viewer. The surface of the scroll is the osmotic membrane of a living cell; it is a Janus surface, an epidermis through which endless stories come and go.[9] Those stories are *nowhere*, as Porter H. Abbott simply puts it, "before [they are] realized in words or on stage" (2002: 14); but for those who are competent enough to realize them, that is to say, to engage in this kind of experience exchange, their number is inexhaustible.

Endnotes

1 Here is one such legend about a famous Chinese painter recounted by François Cheng: "Li Ssu-hsün was ... given the task of painting the folding screens of the palace. He depicted on them scenes of mountains and waters that earned the admiration of all. However, one day the emperor complained to the painter, 'The waterfalls you have painted are too noisy; they are keeping me from sleeping'" (1994: 28).

2 This particular power is attributed to the painter Chang Seng-yu of the Northern and Southern dynasties, who, upon painting four eyeless dragons on a wall, fills in the eyes of two of them with a final brushstroke, and the wonder-stricken crowd notices, after a tumult and a deafening noise, that there are only two dragons left on the wall (Cheng, 1994: 26-7).

3 Perhaps the best comment as to the difficulty of defining this term properly comes from Michael Sullivan, when he asserts that "[a]ny educated Chinese will tell you that he knows what *ch'i-yün* means, although he might have difficulty in putting it into English," concluding that it must be this very "suggestive vagueness" of the term which has rendered it resistant to the wear of so many centuries (1979: 31).

4 The engraving dates from 151 C.E., and the readers are kindly invited to take note of the title as more will be said about it in the coming paragraphs.

5 Chen identifies four different styles in the execution of the continuous method in Chinese pictorial narratives—styles with self-explanatory titles: 1) *different actions sharing a common background*, 2) *continuous narration in a serpentine layout*, 3) *achronological narration in a lateral layout*, and 4) *chronological narration in a lateral layout* (1995: 248).

6 This distinction between *story* and *discourse* has been adopted, elaborated—and of course, at times also contested—by many narratologists (Culler, 1980).

7 *Jātakas* are stories of self-sacrifice suffered by Buddha in his previous incarnations (Chen, 1995: 247). This particular *jātaka*, for which it will be necessary to quote Chen at some length, is a story of betrayal:

> The first and second scenes at the left end of the frieze show the Deer King carrying the man on his back crossing a river, and the man subsequently kneeling on the ground to thank him. But in the third and fourth scenes at the right end of the frieze, the man reports to the royal couple seated in their palace, and leads the imperial hunt to find the deer for its nine-colored skin and golden antlers. The fifth scene on the left side of the frieze shows the Deer King, unaware of the danger, lying asleep at its usual place. The concluding scene is placed in the middle of the frieze, and represents the Deer King explaining the earlier rescue of the man. Due to these events, the deer's life was spared, and the traitor was punished (252).

8 Although Wen C. Fong is elaborating upon a division first proposed by John Hay, I prefer to use his terms, for the sake of their added clarity, over Hay's terms of *moral-narrative, literary-narrative* and *genre-narrative.*

9 Evidently, this conceptualization of pictorial narratives as a platform for exchanging experiences, rather than a means of merely illustrating verbal narratives, has broad applications; for example, in an article exploring the use of notional ekphrasis in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh,* Tekin focuses on the blue Chinese tiles of the Mattancherri Synagogue in the novel as a pictorial narrative ensemble with unlimited potential for storytelling depending on who gazes at them with what aspirations. The critic uses the art of memory and the theory of "phantasms" to explain the primacy of images over words, and claims, in a final analysis, that these "metamorphic" tiles serve as an allegory of the encounter with a work of art, "conveying the nature and all the complexities of the dialogue established between the work and those who experience it" (Tekin, 2013: 73).

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